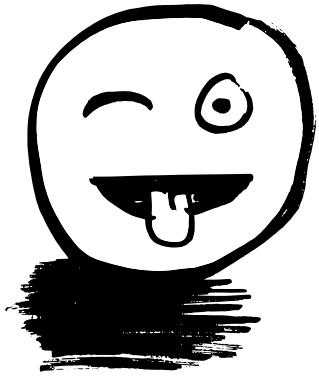
Volume 7 *Absence* Article 2

1-1-2016

Mirthful Architecture

James Zeller
Iowa State University

Mirthful Architecture
by James Zeller



"Death got you down? At last an alternative!"
- LA Weekly

In their March 1999 issue, LA Weekly listed this advertisement with a link to a website called "Final Curtain[1]". The website, adorned in serif fonts and floral edging, proposes a series of memorial parks that "throw away all the rules" for creative individuals who wish to invent their own specific "works of passage" and memorials for the afterlife. At the bottom of the page, visitors are welcomed to submit their own proposals for a chance to win a limited scholarship for artists, which would consist of a free plot on their grounds, and a chance to be featured on their online gallery. Of the submittals, few, if anym resemble your normal gravestone and the great majority more closely resemble theme park amusements. Mary Dresser plans on having her ashes mixed with a suitable soil and placed into a larger-than-life Ant Farm. Nick Gaetano would like a neon sign that reads, "Nick is Dead" to serve as his tombstone. Kim Markegard's plot will consist of a 10x10 dancefloor and a jukebox. Alex Repasky plans on putting his ashes in an etch-a-sketch.

In his final press release, made in May of 2000, Joey Skaggs revealed that Final Curtain was a hoax aimed at drawing attention to the death-care industry and its morbid grip on funeral services[2]. Many people were outraged, offended, or disgusted by the idea of blenders filled with cremated human remains (so the deceased can be "whipped into a frenzy"), but Skaggs were able to call into question and change the conversation around our death-care industry through his use of satire. Since the new millennia and the "passing" of Final Curtain, many new and more sustainable burial practices have seen recent popularity, from biodegradable urns[3] to coral reef shells made from cremation[4]. Irreverence, even in the case of death, can have a lasting change in public practice.

Is there a place, then, for laughter and satire in the built environment? Art has a unique tolerance for vulgarity since art is most characteristically personal and interpretive. However, once "buffoonery" begins to invade real public space and private investment, it is often the designer who is held responsible. We should be clear that satire, humor and levity in general are important tools for critical thinking. We are

1 "The Final Curtain." 7 Jul. 2016 <http://www.finalcurtain.com/>
2 "Final Curtain – Joey Skaggs." 2016. 7 Jul. 2016 <http://www.joeyskaggs.com/works/final-curtain/>
3 "Bios Urn - Biodegradable Urn with seed." 2014. 7 Jul. 2016 <https://urnabios.com/>
4 "Eternal Reefs » Living legacies that memorialize our loved ones." 7 Jul. 2016 <http://eternalreefs.com/>

Steintor Tram & Bus Stop, Hannover, Alessandro Mendini, 1992
Photo by: Christian A. Shröder

often too careful around the things we hold most reverently to begin to see them critically. As a high-risk, high-visibility profession, Architecture tends to distance itself from the kind cultural self-criticism that is so beneficial to discussion and instead confines itself within "appropriate" design.

Slavoj Žižek, a popular contemporary Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic, explains that this kind of restraint, or what he discusses as "political correctness", stands in the way of true social understanding. He argues that jokes, especially ones that cross the line into the obscene, vulgar, and racist territory, offer true "shared obscene solidarity" wherein the disparity that separates us can be confronted instead of being topically hidden under restraint[1].

Among the things contemporary architects abhor lies postmodernism, or those buildings so detested that they are often described as vulgar. Post-modernism's predecessor modernism excelled in the kind of self-restraint currently decried by Zizek. Broadly speaking, postmodernism tried to address what they claimed to be modernism's shortfalls: cold, undecorated and unforgiving environments that couldn't fill the human need for comfort, familiarity or beauty. Between these two movements was an argument over the usage and usefulness of decoration: where one said, "Less is More," the other countered with, "Less is a Bore." Robert Venturi's response to Mies van der Rohe is a clever example of the witty and referential treatments of past styles or logics of postmodernists. These were often used in order to communicate double coded meanings and self-aware critiques on itself. Postmodernist thought even pervaded other mediums like television and comics, where characters often "broke the fourth wall" and invaded the assumptions we make daily, even passing criticism to the writers and creators themselves.

Indeed, it is difficult to find any architects who would self-identify as postmodernist today, even though the movement has been described as the cultural logic of late capitalism. The few designers who do accept postmodernist as their title have collectively generated some of the most whacky, strange, and playful designs that exist today. Notable in this group is Robert Venturi and Alessandro Mendini, whose colorful buildings were like masses stuck together with bright, overpowering, diagonal patterns plastered and repeated ad infinitum on their facades: all of which decisively question modernism's assertion for restraint. They are, at their core, playful.

Today, we are left with half-in-the-bag playful spaces, where their only defining features to distinguish themselves from the bland modernism of the 1900's is the carpet samples. Even then, in these spaces which claim to be youthful and jubilant, there is nothing but complacency left to give credence to what used to be a discipline of knowledge. Any innovation to speak of lies closer to the disciplines of material design and manufacturing than to architectural design, and this has left some young architects scratching their heads, wondering where the dissent that was so promising in school has left off to. Architectural designers who are both committed to the communities they design for and who share an interest in being skeptical or critical are yearning for their moment to make a difference. Yet, instead, they are stuck between clients who are (rightfully) entitled to the designs that they are paying for, and a professional organization that regulates and facilitates a discussion but is unable or otherwise unwilling to see itself critically.

1 "Slavoj Žižek: Political Correctness is a More Dangerous ... - YouTube." 2015. 7 Jul. 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5dNbWGaaxWM>

What happens instead is a regimented "professionalism", or at best, a reserved kind of playfulness that happens only in the surface aesthetic but remains uncritical of the processes which constrain it.

Artists and producers of far off genres have been breaking ground outside of architecture and asking the essential, irreverent questions. Comedians like Bo Burnham are defying genre norms and are exploring that which constrains their work. Bo's latest performance "Make Happy" pushes the boundary of comedy, occasionally crossing over from silly and ridiculous to serious and almost painful. Burnham seems to revel in his contorted position between the audience's ruthless expectation to be entertained and his responsibility to be truthful to his performance. He constantly pulls back the curtain, asking the audience "I can't figure out why you're here", questioning his own place in a discipline of entertainment. Burnham isn't the only artist breaking convention.

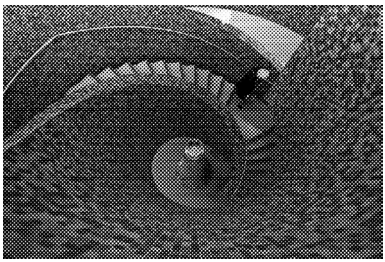


Photo Credit: I Harsten

Why can't we be self-critical towards Architectural practice? There is a large precedence for impatience towards young architects speaking out against some of the traditions of professional practice, on top of the mountain of complaints against styles that subvert power against what is typical, like postmodernism. Architectural practice fails to ask these questions against itself. Perhaps this is why Elia Zenghelis has said we are in a "doldrum," or a moment of directionless-ness.

It is quite easy to criticize student work as being overambitious and naïve, but perhaps the reverse is true, too; practices that remain complacent to popular trends and resistant to new or skeptical projects are in denial about their place in the profession. A common critique that students get in school is that "a client would never want/agree to that," but this is beside the point. As professionals of the built environment, we should be the ones leading the conversation about public spaces, not clients. Maybe this is counter-productive to a business of service, but we lend more than our service, we are a discipline of knowledge. Our education and studio culture has equipped us to be able to ask and address larger cultural questions and pose possible answers and responses. As the new generation graduates from college and becomes the world's new architectural designers, perhaps a question we ought to be asking is "why are we here?" And when it comes to offering the world a new set of questions and answers, maybe we'll have the guts to be a little irreverent.